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ABSTRACT

This paper is the third in an Education Commission of the States (ECS) series focusing on the problems of youth at risk of not successfully making the transition to adulthood. The topic of this paper is the use of both existing and new information to understand the magnitude, scope, and future of students who are educationally at risk. The first sections discuss indicators that help tell who is at risk. The second section discusses problems in managing large quantities of data. In the final section the ways policymakers can use information to inform and make better policy decisions is considered. In Appendix A, issues of defining and counting dropouts are discussed. Appendix B presents a potential school dropout form and, Appendix C lists data-gathering instruments. Appended is a bibliography and 27 references. (SI)

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The First Step: Understanding The Data

YOUTH AT RISK

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THE FIRST STEP: UNDERSTANDING THE DATA

By

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November 1987

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FOREWORD

This paper is the third of an Education Commission of the States (ECS) series focusing on the problems of youth at risk of not successfully making the transition to adulthood - the dropout, the underachiever and far too many others of our young people who end up disconnected from school and society. The topic of this paper is the use of both existing and new information to understand the magnitude, scope and nature of students who are educationally at risk. Such an understanding is the first step for schools, districts and states better to serve at risk youngsters.

Although arguments continue about whether the number of students who drop out of school is closer to 12% or 27%, there is a growing consensus that the demands of international competitiveness will force this country to reduce significantly this rate of failure, no matter what its magnitude. In order to accomplish this goal, better information on the progress that youngsters make is essential, as is the continuous evaluation of strategies employed to ensure each student's success in school.

Van Dougherty, an ECS policy analyst has been with the commission for nine years. Most recently, she has worked on issues of school finance and school improvement. She is currently focusing her efforts on the commission's Youth At Risk Project. The author would like to thank Scott Miller, Rex Brown, Pat Callan, Fred Hess, Richard McCann, Kent McGuire and Sherry Freeland Walker for their comments on earlier drafts of the paper and Judi Nicholes for her help in preparing the manuscript.

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Frank Newman
ECS President

Bob Palaich
Project Director

INTRODUCTION

During the past few years an increased dialogue on education in this country has paved the way for a wide range of programs, policies and reforms dealing with schools, students and teachers. These initiatives have, by and large, focused on raising teacher salaries, increasing course requirements for students and making the high school curriculum more rigorous. Now, another debate is forming about students who are not completing their high school educations or who are in danger of not doing so. Although these students are not a recent phenomenon, they are receiving increased attention.

According to numerous studies, polls, surveys and data bases, a sizeable number of youth are not successfully participating in the educational process. The term "at-risk youth" is now commonplace among researchers, policy makers and educators. These young people are at risk not only of not getting a diploma, but also of graduating with inadequate academic competencies, of not pursuing additional educational experiences, of not becoming successfully employed and of not making a successful transition to adulthood and becoming productive members of society.

The reasons these youth are at risk are many. Substance abuse, delinquency, pregnancy, poverty and low educational achievement are all familiar indicators of the plight of many young people. Statistics on each underscore the magnitude of the problem. About 22% of children live in poverty; drug and alcohol abuse have risen 60-fold since 1960; teenage homicide is up 200% for whites since 1950; teenage arrests doubled from 1960 to 1980; teenage unemployment is up 35% for whites and 60% for non-whites since 1961. Although any one of these indicators is cause for alarm, the fact that many youth fall into multiple categories is even more troubling.

Why the rising concern about dropouts in particular, the most obvious case of being "at risk," and about at-risk youth in general? First, few of the education reforms enacted in the early 1980s have addressed the needs of students who may see these new,

stricter policies as the final push out the schoolroom door (MDC, 1985). There is also concern that more rigorous academic standards may increase the dropout rate (Natriello, Pallas, 1986).

Second, minority populations, who traditionally have not performed as well in school and have had higher dropout rates than their white counterparts, are making up an increasing proportion of public school enrollments (Hodgkinson, 1985; Levin, 1985). This combination portends that even larger numbers of minority students may not complete high school, a failing that will follow these students the rest of their lives. The U.S. Department of Commerce estimates that students with only one or two years of high school will earn 25% less over their lifetime than high school graduates, a loss to society in terms of tax revenues as well as to the individual.

Heightened interest in competitiveness in the world marketplace is a third reason for concern. Studies show that U.S. business and industry will experience shortages of entry-level workers within the next decade and that many jobs will require higher skills than today's typical high school graduates possess (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; ECS, 1983). Large numbers of high school students at risk of school failure is economically unacceptable.

Fourth, it costs society more to provide for a population dependent on welfare and other state and federal subsidies than to educate and assist students in becoming participating members of society. One researcher estimated that society loses $200,000 per dropout through loss of tax revenues and increased welfare, unemployment and crime costs (Catterall, 1985). This adds up to $200 billion for each school class across the nation. Even if those figures are substantially reduced to allow for weak labor markets and other factors, the losses still add up to $26,000 per dropout and more than $20 billion per class cohort, he found.

Harold Hodgkinson of the Institute for Educational Leadership has pointed out that the costs to the nation reach even further. In 1950, every American retiree had 17

workers paying his or her Social Security benefits. In 1992, that figure will drop to three, one of them minority, he said.

State and local policy makers are looking for solutions to this increasing population of youth at risk. They want to know where to put the effort, where to put the money, how much it will cost and what kinds of policies and programs will help solve the problem. But, they are getting different messages about who is at risk, what kinds of information they should collect and what are the best ways to use that information.

Gathering information about youth at risk should not be an obstacle to action, but the lack of accurate, comparable data has made it difficult for educators and policy makers to get a true picture of the scope and nature of the problem. This report looks at the information commonly available to policy makers and explores some of the issues in collecting, understanding and using the data.

THE PROBLEMS

Data and statistics serve some important functions. They show how many people are or are not affected by a particular policy/issue. Data describe characteristics of students and groups of students who are at risk. They help policy makers determine, and illustrate, whether schools, organizations, programs and policies are successful. They help them understand whether a problem is increasing or decreasing, what resources are needed and how they should be distributed.

Organizations, federal, state and local governments, and schools collect a wealth of information. Nationally, the National Assessment of Educational Progress focuses on trends in achievement. The Scholastic Aptitude Test and American College Testing programs try to predict future achievement in postsecondary education.

Data sets from the federal High School and Beyond data base have been analyzed to determine how achievement and attitudes differ among students who drop out of school and those who stay. (The most frequently cited studies from that data base analyze the school experiences of 1980 high school sophomores from 1980 to 1982). Other data from the federal government and national organizations supply information on poverty, unemployment and teen pregnancy. Evaluation data from Chapter 1 and Head Start programs describe the impact of early intervention on the later education success of children. Organizations such as the Council of Chief State School Officers collect data across states on the number of youth who drop out of school. State departments of education and local school districts collect student-related statistics such as test scores, attendance patterns and grade-point averages. State and local youth-serving organizations gather data on the clients they serve.

Lack of data is not the issue. Given the extent of data collection, it should be easy to determine exactly who is at risk of failing the education process. Why, then, is it so difficult to do so? There are several reasons. (1) The definitions of youth at risk are diverse and conflicting. "There are at least as many definitions of a dropout," for

example, "as there are school districts recording dropouts," according to Phi Delta Kappa's Center for Evaluation, Development and Research. The three major sources of national data — the Census Bureau, the National Center for Education Statistics and the High School and Beyond survey -- use different definitions, and come up with dropout rates ranging from 14% to 28%. (2) Information is not available to the right people, such as teachers who are the ones working directly with students. (3) Educators and policy makers do not use, know how to use or understand the information that is available. Most likely, it is a combination of all of these.

The collection, interpretation and use of data and information about high-risk youth raise a number of issues at both the state and local levels. The following section discusses indicators that help tell who is at risk. Subsequent sections discuss problems in managing large quantities of data and ways policy makers can use information to inform and make better policy. In Appendix A, issues of defining and counting dropouts are discussed.

INDICATORS OF RISK

How does one judge who is at risk? Traditionally, risks are calculated in terms of background characteristics and conditions, (e.g., poverty and ethnicity). Descriptions of risk also focus on family characteristics, such as living in single-parent households, or on specific problems such as pregnancy or substance abuse.

This paper is principally concerned with youth who may be at risk in the educational sense, students who, for a variety of reasons, do not perform well in school and who are likely to drop out. The school career of these students is characterized by low achievement, poor self-esteem, frequent absences and behavior problems. If such risk factors can be identified, they can be used to tailor policies and programs that will keep an "at-risk" student in school.

While much of the research has focused on characteristics of youth in an attempt to find out why some drop out of school or to identify students who are likely to, researchers are increasingly looking at school factors that contribute to the problem, such as tracking policies, inconsistent treatment of discipline problems or disinterested teachers (Fine, 1985; Wehlage and Rutter, 1986). Any discussion about future data needs should include the characteristics of schools that may have a negative impact on students.

Student Indicators

Using national, state and locally generated data, some states and districts are attempting to devise profiles of high-risk students by finding out why students dropped out. Most of the profiles are based on self-reports by dropouts and the High School and Beyond study. Often used by researchers to understand why a student left school, the latter cites reasons such as "did not like school," "could not get along with teachers" or "had to help to support family."

The belief is that profiles of dropouts will provide schools with a better estimate of the problems and the potential demands that will be placed on the schools. However, many studies of dropouts simply list the reasons that students give for dropping out. Unfortunately, they don't provide much insight into what preceded that decision. Methods to identify students at risk of dropping out need to provide more than simply a checklist of variables.

Discussions with teachers, principals, counselors and other education personnel indicate that a wide range of indicators can and should be used to identify at-risk youth. Among them are low attendance, poor school performance (as evidenced by both low grades and standardized test scores) and grade retention. These data generally are collected by all schools.

Other, more qualitative indicators are less likely to be systematically recorded by schools, yet teachers say that many of these signal that a student may be having difficulties both inside and outside school. Passive or disruptive behavior in classrooms, health or emotional problems are frequently mentioned. Teachers also say that students who have no connection to the school outside the classroom — who do not belong to clubs or participate in organized sports or extracurricular activities — are students who show signs of disconnection to school and may be at risk of dropping out.

Some school districts are trying to link quantitative and qualitative information to provide school personnel with a more complete picture of students. A North Carolina district uses a "Potential School Dropout Form" developed by the North Carolina Department of Education. Student information provided by teachers, counselors, administrators and parents is included on the form. The collected information ranges from basic student data such as attendance, grade retention, basic skills, subjects failed and family history to "observed data" such as school performance, behavior, study/work habits, participation in extracurricular activities, self-concept, types of friends, substance abuse, physical and/or mental health problems. (See Appendix B.)

In Florida, researchers at Florida Atlantic University based the following observations on research into the use of profiles and applying profile characteristics.

1. Profiles consisting of a list of variables or criteria often do not provide adequate direction to policy makers and educators because they fail to: (a) identify which are the most important factors in a student's decision to drop out, (b) specify the combinations of variables that may predict a future dropout or (c) identify the critical times at which certain factors or events adversely affect a student.

2. Some identification systems are based on "catalyst variables" — events that immediately precede the decision to drop out. Profiles relying strictly on these often result in a student's problems being identified too late or in factors that led to the decision being ignored.

3. The most accurate identification methods frequently use data not readily available in student records, such as teacher observations and interviews.

4. Many profiles identify factors that cannot be addressed by existing school services or programs.

5. Many profiles ignore school factors such as unfair or inconsistent discipline policies that contribute to a student's decision to drop out.

6. Variables such as socioeconomic status, sex and racial/ethnic background are fairly useless predictors when the majority of a school's student population is associated with them. (Florida Department of Education, 1986).

However, as the Florida researchers observed, the importance of the fifth and sixth observations listed above must be stressed. Policy makers must recognize that schools with few "at-risk youth" may differ drastically from large urban schools. The current structure of public schools may not be capable of educating a majority population of at-risk youth. Schools with many high-risk youth may not have the capacity to work with students individually. They may not have sufficient resources, in terms of time, money, staff or expertise, to provide the multitude of educational and other services needed to reach a large population of youth at risk. This is not to say that urban systems are doomed to failure, only that solutions beyond attempting to identify at-risk youth by a checklist of student characteristics must be pursued. If states get into the business of indicators and profiles of high-risk youth, this distinction must be taken into consideration.

Nonetheless, the criteria for designing profiles hold some promise for developing a framework for some schools to use as they address the needs of youth at risk. As it stands now, much of the information about youth at risk, especially qualitative observations, is not always gathered in a systematic way, is not provided to school staff in ways they can use and is not linked to an appropriate and timely intervention.

School Indicators

Because many background characteristics and situations of students are unalterable, one must also examine the experiences students have in school. Studies of the schooling process indicate that schools must change some of their policies and practices to achieve greater success with some students. In an analysis of the High School and Beyond data that looked primarily at administrative practices and school policies, researchers found that certain characteristics of schools negatively affect students and increase their disconnection to school (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Their findings indicate that (1) perceived lack of teacher interest in students, (2) ineffective

and unfair discipline systems and (3) the allowance of widespread truancy "form a pattern that cannot be easily dismissed because they reflect a fundamental problem with the perceived legitimacy of the institution." They further state that these problems have implications not only for dropouts but also for the degree of involvement by those who choose to stay. Other researchers agree, saying that structural factors, such as tracking and sorting students or suspension and expulsion policies, often force students out of school (Fine, 1986).

If the school is to blame, at least in part, for the disengagement of students, then educators need to know how students perceive schools and teachers, and how teachers perceive students and the schools in which they teach. Data on the interactions between the school, student and teacher and on the perceptions of students and teachers should be used to identify areas for improvement.

Four instruments are available to help gather this information: Educational Quality Assessment, Quality of School Life, Effective Schools Battery and Wisconsin Youth Survey. These instruments are designed with high-risk youth as the focus. They seek information about student expectations, perceptions about rules and regulations, attitudes toward the school and teachers. They also include questions about teacher expectations, student interest and involvement in school and school climate. (See Appendix C for a description of each instrument and how they may be obtained.)

A key concern for state and local policy makers is how to use profiles or indicators and, at the same time, avoid negative labels, stigmas and self-fulfilling prophesies. Identifying students as being at risk could potentially do more harm than good if efforts are not made to ensure that such students are not subjected to situations that increase their disconnection to school and their education.

DATA MANAGEMENT

The day-to-day management of large quantities of information is no small task. Teachers remark that they know quite a bit about the students they come in contact with, but have little time to share that information with other teachers and staff. Many schools do not provide a formal structure by which teachers can record their observations and consult with each other on the best ways to work with individual students.

Computers hold much promise because they make it possible for greater amounts of student information to be shared among all school personnel. A carefully designed software package that allows for a variety of student information to be recorded could provide useful information on an ongoing basis. Information could be categorized not only by students, but also by class, grade and teacher. Analyses of the data could indicate, for example, which students took certain classes, how much absenteeism there was in a given class or grade, behavior patterns and other variables. A computerized student record system also could yield information on how successful or unsuccessful certain efforts have been with individual students. Such data could be the basis for attempts to improve programs, policies and services (ECS, 1985).

For such a system to work, however, it must be easily accessible to those personnel who have the most contact with students — the teachers. Unfortunately, teachers remark that computers are not commonly available to them. As one teacher said: "I go into a first-grade classroom and students have access to computers, while the teacher is busy drawing lines on a sheet of paper to record attendance in the class."

A Colorado school district is currently developing a such a computerized system to identify at-risk students. In cooperation with the Human Resources Department and other agencies such as social services, Head Start, juvenile justice and mental health, the district drew up a list of seven indicators related to dropping out of school: attendance, mobility/transiency, family status, ethnicity, suspension, gender and achievement. A district committee composed of counselors, social workers and psychologists will match

student information to the indicators to rank students from high to low risk. A team of educators and agency personnel will identify the needs of high-risk students and develop an alternative education program and/or recommend other strategies. Community agencies will provide information on students who are receiving their services, although specific details will not be part of the computerized student record. The philosophy behind this system is to monitor the progress of high-risk youth inside and outside the school to spot problems before they develop. This program will be piloted in the 1987-88 school year in four elementary, two middle and two high schools.

However, computerized individual student profiles that contain more personal information on a student and his/her experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, raise several important issues. One is access. Another is the legal question of privacy. Who will have access to the information? Will the information create unfair prejudices about certain students? What kinds of information are and are not necessary for educators to have?

CURRENT DATA NEEDS

After the data are collected, how should policy makers use what they find out?

To learn about the magnitude of the problem

Before sound policy can be formulated, local and state policy makers must understand how big the problem is — how many young people are at risk? Where are they? Are their numbers increasing or decreasing? What particular problems do they have?

To begin, states should define dropouts, for example, and require all school districts to use that definition. This would provide a state with comparable information about the number of youth at risk in every district and school. However, while a statewide definition is necessary to eliminate technical and political problems that hamper more accurate and reliable collection of data, it will not answer all the data needs at the local level. (See Appendix A for a discussion of issues pertaining to the collection of dropout statistics."

What it will do is help states collect the base data they need to evaluate the impact of services for at-risk youth and to spot and monitor trends. A trend toward more teenage pregnancies, for instance, can help determine policy and program responses. Trends can be used as evidence to develop financial support for education and create and continue public awareness of the problem.

Monitoring statewide trends can also yield information about future needs of the student population. For example, Colorado tests entering first graders on a variety of skills, including listening, word analysis, vocabulary, reading, language skills and mathematics. The lack of such skills indicates these students are likely to need additional help. The first graders also are categorized by those who have had preschool and/or kindergarten experience. The Department of Education is finding that blacks and Hispanics enter school with far fewer skills than Anglo students. Information such as this

has been used to develop support for a new task force, First Impressions, which will study and develop policy strategies for early childhood education in Colorado.

Another indicator of how widespread a certain problem might be is the demographic breakdown of a community or state. Researchers know that dropouts, for example, tend to be disproportionately from minority and low-income families. As states look at causes of and strategies to prevent dropping out, they need to know the characteristics of their population and how it's changing. For example, studies show that in certain areas of the country, the white majority is being replaced by blacks and Hispanics (Hodgkinson, 1985). Other studies show that the dropout rate is not remaining constant among groups of students. The Census Bureau has indicated that dropout rates for blacks and for white females have decreased, while the figures for white and Hispanic males have increased (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1982).

Baseline information also is necessary to understand where concentrations of high-risk youth are. Across large districts, as well as within states, schools may vary widely in the make-up of their student population and the school's capacity to provide comprehensive services to students at risk. This distinction must be kept in mind when developing policy and programs.

In summary, at the state level, better documentation and understanding of the magnitude of the problem assists policy makers in marshalling the resources needed to address the issues of youth at risk. As long as data are perceived to be inaccurate and unreliable, it will be difficult, at best, to convince policy makers, legislators and educators that there really is a problem and that they should provide the necessary resources, whether dollars or human capital, and to encourage leaders at both the state and local level.

To Evaluate the Effectiveness of Programs and Policies

Policy makers also use data to develop and evaluate programs and to change or implement new policies. Systematic evaluations of programs and services depend on baseline data to determine whether or not a particular strategy has produced the desired results.

However, few programs are systematically assessed. The Consortium on Dropout Prevention (a group of nine school districts across the country formed to gather and share information about dropout prevention practices) surveyed 564 middle and high schools in member districts during 1985 to look at, among other things, evaluation of programs initiated to prevent dropouts. It found that 13% of the programs were being formally evaluated; 26% had data of some kind, such as attendance, retention, graduation rates, but 61% were unable to provide any data about student progress due to participation in the program. The researchers noted that "without a reasonable data base, changes caused by program interventions cannot be validly or consistently measured."

Evaluation data also help policy makers determine if a program's benefits exceed its cost or if one program is more cost-effective than another. Only by evaluating both the program outcomes and costs associated with implementing a program can policy makers begin to understand the components of successful programs. Evidence suggests that successful interventions may be expensive — lower class size, new curriculum, staff training. Given the fiscal picture in many schools, it will be necessary to determine if a given program is worth the cost (Rumberger, 1986).

CONCLUSION

Although policy makers have some broad-based data about youth at risk, they seldom have all the information they need to make critical education policy decisions. The place to start when making state policy is to understand the magnitude of the problem — how many youth drop out of school, why did they leave, how many other youth are at risk of leaving? Data are also necessary to determine the scope of the problem. Is the state's at-risk population primarily confined to a small number of students in a few schools or districts? Does it encompass certain groups of students? Is it a problem that is confined to high school or does it extend to the early grades? These and other questions must be answered prior to developing policies to address the needs of these youth.

At the local level, better information is needed about the progress of students through school and about what types of interventions have been tried. More qualitative information, such as study habits, parental support or health problems can help schools better understand and serve their students. Documenting the magnitude of the problem is important, but improving education for youth at risk requires new types of information.

Research is just beginning to unravel the complexities of the at-risk youth population — what works with which students and why. Program evaluations should look not only at numbers of students who successfully complete programs, who graduate from high school, who have fewer absences, etc., but also at student and staff attitudes, expectations, changes in student behavior, self-esteem, feelings of self-worth and future goals. Schools policies and practices should be examined to determine what structures contribute to student disconnection from school.

Information of this kind is a starting point for looking at how schools educate all children, not just those who are deemed "at risk." Data on students, schools and programs are the foundation upon which policy can be made. Information is obtainable;

however, it is just beginning to be used in ways that increase understanding of why students leave school and why some schools are more successful with certain students than others.

APPENDIX A

Counting Dropouts

How many young people drop out of school? The question is not as simple as it sounds. Some studies put the national figure at around 25%, increasing to more than 50% in many urban schools (Reconnecting Youth, 1985). No one knows precise figures, and while the issues surrounding high-risk youth are pressing, much of the delay in devising solutions is mired in determining who is a dropout and how many there are.

The Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) recently looked at how states and large metropolitan school districts define dropouts and collect data. Both organizations reported many differences and some similarities regarding both the definition of dropouts and the methods of counting them.

The CGCS survey suggests that counts of dropouts and definitions of dropouts vary for several reasons:

1. Different methods of defining and computing enrollment
2. Different methods of defining and computing dropouts
3. Different methods of verifying students' status
4. Uncontrollable community differences such as mobility/transiency

The survey found three methods of counting enrollment: average enrollment over a period of time, enrollment on a fixed date and cumulative enrollment during the course of the school year. Although no method is better than another, CGCS suggests that the way enrollment is counted may produce an inflated or deflated picture of dropouts in a state. For example, districts using a fixed-date method to count enrollment, especially one close to the beginning of the school year, likely will get a higher dropout count, particularly in districts with a high mobility/transiency rate. On the other hand, cumulative counting inflates enrollment and causes the dropout rate to be smaller.

To document the numbers of dropouts accurately, a state must consistently define who is a dropout. As both the CGCS and CCSSO reports attest, states and districts vary widely in their definitions of who is and who is not to be counted as a dropout. For example, one large urban school system has 20 codes by which school personnel can categorize students who have left school. There is a specific code for "dropout," as well as codes for married, cannot adjust, lost, not coming to school, needed at home, etc.

CGCS found the following definitions of dropouts.

- Any person who leaves school prior to graduation or completion of a formal high school education or legal equivalent, who does not within 45 days enter another public or private educational institution or school program
- Any entering freshman who does not graduate with his or her class

- Any senior high school student who leaves school before graduating because he or she is over age, working full-time, institutionalized, in military service, pregnant, married, was excluded or could not be located

- Any student who stops attending and has no intention of re-enrolling in another diploma-granting school

- Any student who leaves school before graduation or completion of the 12th grade for any reason other than transferring to another school district. This includes all students who dropped out, were expelled/excluded or died.

- Any student registered in grades 9-12 at a regular high school who leaves school and does not return or graduate between October 1 and June 30

Perhaps more important than the numbers is knowing why a student drops out. The CCCS survey reported several problem areas in verifying why some students leave school.

1. Reliability of personnel collecting the information

2. How extensively school personnel attempt to verify students' whereabouts

3. Requesting and transmitting of student records from school to school or district-to-district.

Although problems relating to counting enrollment and defining and verifying dropouts are within the control of schools and policy makers, the CCCS researchers suggested that outside influences may impede the comparison of dropout rates from district-to-district or state-to-state. For example, cities or states with large immigrant populations and cities with industries that employ seasonal workers or large military populations can expect a higher student turnover rate. Accurate reporting of dropouts, especially for comparison purposes, should take these factors into consideration.

CCSSO undertook a similar survey to describe state data collection methods with respect to dropouts. Researchers found that:

1. Not all states collect dropout statistics.

2. Statistics are collected in different grades.

3. Schools do not have a systematic way of keeping records of students who leave or enter.

4. There is no standard length of time for determining when a student who is not in school becomes a dropout.

The survey looked largely at the definitions of dropouts, suspended and expelled students and graduates and found many of the same problems CCCS found. The survey revealed that 29 states do not collect any data on expelled students; 33 do not collect any data on suspended students. While most states agree on the definition of "expelled" and "suspended," the length of the

expulsion or suspension before being counted as a dropout varies widely. The definition of a graduate was generally consistent across all states.

Some of these technical issues and the reasons they are not easily changed or modified have their roots in politics. Because of an increased emphasis on accountability, brought on in part by the excellence and school reform movements of the last several years, many states are reporting statewide statistics on schools, allowing comparisons of how one school is doing versus another school (or district or state).

Dropout rates are one way of measuring school performance. While comparisons of dropout rates of one district or state to another are unnecessary, given the variety of types of districts and states and their respective populations, the holding power of a school is an important indicator of how well the school is responding to its students.

Additionally, the collection of accurate dropout data can be skewed by the way state aid is passed out. Because aid is distributed on a per-pupil basis, it is in the financial interest of schools and administrators to report large enrollments. Few, if any, financial incentives exist to encourage collecting accurate and more detailed information on dropouts.

In sum, collection of accurate dropout data, both in terms of numbers and definitions, is necessary to provide a meaningful measure of success, to help target populations or age groups that seem to drop out more often than others and to evaluate dropout prevention programs.

APPENDIX B

NORTH CAROLINA SCHOOLS
Potential School Dropout Form

Note: From the State Department of Public Instruction, North Carolina, 1985

Name of Student_____ **Grade Level**_____ **Date**_____

Referring Teacher_____ **School**_____

Identified exceptionality (if appropriate)_____

Listed below are characteristics of potential school dropouts. Please check the appropriate column box for each characteristic. In addition, check the appropriate column for the characteristics you think are significantly impacting on the student's potential to be a school dropout. At the end of each section is a space for you to write pertinent comments.

I. **FACTUAL CHARACTERISTICS**

School:		Number of Days	Absent/	Tardy
1.	Irregular attendance and/or frequent tardiness.	First 9 weeks	_____	_____
		Second 9 weeks	_____	_____
		Third 9 weeks	_____	_____
		Fourth 9 weeks	_____	_____
2.	Failure - School Years	Number school years retained_____ Retained in current grade [ ] Yes [ ] No		
3.	Student lacks basic skills necessary for success.	A. Check appropriate areas where basic skills are deficient: [ ] Reading [ ] Comm. Skills [ ] Writing [ ] Mathematics [ ] Spelling [ ] Other_____		
		B. California Achievement Test Scores Composite percentile_____%		
4.	Failure - school subjects	Number of school subjects student is currently failing_____		

Teacher Comments (Items 1-4):_____

_____

Family:

5. Educational level of parents below high school level.

   A. Did father graduate from high school?
   [ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Information Unknown

   B. Did mother graduate from high school?
   [ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Information Unknown

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6. Family patterns of dropping out of school.

   A. Number of brothers/sisters in family_____.

   B. Number of brothers/sisters dropping of school:
   ___Brothers ___Sisters ___Info. Unknown

7. Miscellaneous family characteristics.

   A. Are parents divorced?
   [ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Information Unknown

   B. Does child live in a one parent household?
   [ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Information Unknown

   C. Does child live with a stepfather or stepmother?
   [ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Information Unknown

   D. Does child live in family situation other than with parents (grandparents, foster care, etc.)?
   [ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Information Unknown

   E. Is there a history of frequent family moves/changes in school?
   [ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Information Unknown

   F. Is the child's family currently receiving economic assistance in government sources (food stamps, AFDC, etc.)?
   [ ] Yes [ ] No [ ] Information Unknown

Teacher Comments (Items 5-7)_____

II. OBSERVABLE CHARACTERISTICS

	OCCASIONALLY OBSERVED	FREQUENTLY OBSERVED	UNOBSERVED AND/OR NOT APPLICABLE	SIGNIFICANT PROBLEM
School				
1. Performance consistently below potential.				
2. Pattern of disruptive/ aggressive behavior.				
3. Poor study/work habits (attention span, test-taking ability).				

4. Little or no participation in extracurricular or special interest activities. _____

5. Poor self-concept (withdrawn, lack of friends, feeling of not belonging, etc.). _____

Teacher Comments: _____

_____

	OCCASIONALLY OBSERVED	FREQUENTLY OBSERVED	UNOBSERVED AND/OR NOT APPLICABLE	SIGNIFICANT PROBLEM
Family				
6. Parents not educationally supportive of their child.				
7. Parents not educationally supportive of their child's teacher/administrators.				
8. Unhappy family situation (neglect, abuse, emotional upheaval, lack of discipline, minimal family solidarity).				
9. Few family friends.				

Other Comments: _____

_____

Personal/Peers

10. Friends not school oriented (friends not in school, former dropouts). _____

11. Friends not approved by parents. _____

12. Alcohol/drug abuse. _____

13. Physical health problems (chronic illness, obesity, physical deformity, pregnancy, etc.). _____

Other Comments: _____

_____

Any additional information not covered in this form _____

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX C

Data Gathering Instruments

The following information was provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (Achieving Success With More Students: Addressing the Problem of Students At Risk). These instruments can be used to assist schools and districts assess school climate from both student and staff perspectives. They can also provide data that inform school and district plans to improve services for youth at risk.

Educational Quality Assessment

This instrument, developed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education for use at in grades 4, 6, and 7 contains several sections that are particularly relevant: Self-Concept in School, Health, Understanding Others, Citizenship/Social Responsibility, Work Opportunities and Attitudes and Condition Variables from Students. These sections collect information about student self-concepts and expectations, as well as student decision making in the areas of health (e.g., drugs and alcohol), social situations (e.g., racial, religious or cultural diversity) and legal issues (e.g., rights and properties of others). EQA also includes an instrument to gather teacher perspectives about expectations, student interest and involvement in school, and school climate.

Available from: Pennsylvania Department of Education
Division of Educational Testing and Evaluation
Bureau of Educational Planning and Testing
333 Market Street
Harrisburg, PA 17126

Quality of School Life Scale

The Quality of School Life Scale asks students (upper elementary through high school) to assess three dimensions of school life: satisfaction with school, commitment to classwork and reactions to teachers. It is based on the theory that students who positively assess these dimensions will be more apt to stay in school, develop a lasting commitment to learning and use the school setting as an advantage.

Available from: Riverside Publishing Company
8420 Bryn Mawr Avenue
Chicago, IL 60631

Effective Schools Battery

This instrument was developed at the Johns Hopkins University's Center for Social Organization of Schools to assist in research about how school environments can contribute to delinquency, dropping out and school failure. The ESB asks students for their perceptions of key school environment elements (e.g., rules, rewards, student influence) and of themselves and their peers. It also surveys teachers about school climate. The ESB provides information

that can help a school staff identify elements of the school environment that need attention and assess the effect of changes made in those elements on students and teachers.

Available from: Psychological Assessment Resources, Inc.
P.O. Box 98
Odessa, FL 33556

Wisconsin Youth Survey

The survey was developed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to assess the impact of various interventions designed to encourage at-risk secondary students to continue in school. The instrument obtains information for assessing students' sociocentric reasoning; social bonding to peers, school and teachers; academic self-concept; locus of control; and self-esteem. Data have been collected that suggest the instrument is able to discriminate among these possible program emphases. The WYS is based upon the belief that schools are unlikely to have much effect on students at risk unless there are some fundamental adjustments in the way the institution interacts with them. The establishment of positive social bonds between students and their teachers and peers is viewed as an essential starting point for reversing student alienation.

Available from: National Center on Effective Secondary Schools
University of Wisconsin-Madison
1025 W. Johnson Street
Madison, WI 53706

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